

The Civil War Around Woodberry Forest

From a paper written by John H. VandeVate of Woodberry Forest School, this is a glimpse of some military action in the Orange County area:

The Land, The People, The War

“From the Rappahannock to the North Anna, from the eastern foot of the Blue Ridge to the Wilderness--this area, The Land, was the center of immeasurable bloodshed. Rising above the Rapidan, Clarke’s Mountain gives us a panoramic view of most of The Land. There, just below us as we face northwest, lies the Rapidan--a few miles beyond, Cedar Mountain. Further off to the north stands Thoroughfare Mountain like a monument to the gods. There, to the right, two shining ribbons join, the Rapidan and the Rappahannock. Behind us, the Southwest Mountains stretch across the valley. Beyond stands the Blue Ridge--a dark mass against the pale blue sky. This valley is a natural path from Washington south and west.

“In 1850 about twenty-thousand people lived here, most of them farmers. Wheat, apples, corn, tobacco, wool, and livestock were the main products of their labors. These people were, until 1850, without an outside market. In order to get to the nearest market, Fredericksburg, they had to load up their goods and make a two day journey.

“The Blue Ridge Turnpike, a macadamized link between the fertile valley and eastern markets, was built from New Market through Sperryville to Madison and on to Gordonsville. Two years later construction was started on the Plank Road from Fredericksburg through Orange to Liberty Mills. In 1850 the Orange and Alexandria Railroad was chartered from Alexandria to Gordonsville. Gordonsville became the junction of the Orange and Alexandria and the Virginia Central which ran down to Richmond. By the beginning of the Civil War this was the only railroad link between Washington and the West; an easy route for moving men both north and south; a valuable conduit of food; and an indispensable door to the enemy for whichever army controlled it....”¹

Fire and Brimstone

“...Even before Virginia proclaimed her loyalties, her armies were mobilized and ready. On **April 17th, 1861**,² the day before Virginia seceded, Captain William Scott called the Gordonsville Grays to arms. Soon, they were joined by companies from Barboursville, Staunton, and Charlottesville. At Orange Court House they met the Montpelier Guard and started on their way. Excitement reigned as the overburdened trains carried the anxious young men to the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. All felt the tension, but few, if any, understood the cataclysm. Who

¹ John H. VandeVate, *Camp Life and the Civil War Around Woodberry Forest*, published privately, date unknown, p.1. A copy is on file at the Orange County Historical Society.

² Bold font was not in the original document but added to demonstrate better the chronology of military action.

could have foreseen four years of unremitted war? The people cheered their sons on, on to a war which would ravage their homes and deplete their families.

“The Land and the people were destined to play a major role in the Civil War. After the initial mobilization and attack on Harper’s Ferry, The...first part in the war was in the transportation of Confederate troops to the first battle of Manassas. Young Southern soldiers passed over the Orange and Alexandria Railroad constantly from **April to July of 1861**. After the battle many of these young men returned to Orange Court House, maimed and broken. Others would never return. Orange responded to the needs of these injured soldiers by constructing temporary hospitals at the railroad station, at Peliso House, in their churches and even in the court house.

“More than a year later troops again converged on The Land. In **mid July 1862** General [John] Pope moved his Federal army towards Gordonsville and the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. Another force of about eleven-thousand federal troops was located at Fredericksburg. General Robert E. Lee sent ‘Stonewall’ Jackson with about twenty-thousand war weary Southern troops from the defenses of Richmond to protect the railroad and prevent the two Union forces from joining. On **July 18th** Stonewall’s men reached Louisa Court House. The following day [**July 19**] they camped around Gordonsville.

“On **August 2nd** Jackson ordered Colonel William ‘Gumble’ Jones of the 7th Virginia Cavalry to move his men to the Rapidan and to hold that position. As Jones approached ‘Mayhurst’,³ outside Orange Court House, he was informed that Federal cavalry occupied the town. Old Grumble decided to push on. Main Street was filled with Federal troops, but Jones remained undaunted. The Confederate cavalry charged and cleared the town with some difficulty. Jones pursued the fleeing Yanks to Rapidan Station.

“On **August 7th** spies reported to Jackson that Pope was moving his men towards Culpeper. Stonewall saw his chance--if he could strike Pope before the Federal armies could combine...”⁴

“Jackson’s army spent the night bivouacked around Orange Court House. The General himself fell asleep on the stile in the street upon arriving in Orange. Once his presence was discovered, Jackson was invited to the Willis home where he made his headquarters. The following day, **August 8th**, while Jackson was floundering at Barnett’s Ford, Pope moved to Culpeper Court House and set up his headquarters. ‘The day was hot and many men dropped in the ranks from sunstroke.’ Yet, on the morrow many more would die.”⁵

“Saturday **August 9th** broke bright and the thermometer mounted rapidly. Jackson marched his men towards Culpeper. About mid morning the Confederate troops crossed the Robertson River and approached a split in the road--one branch led west to Madison, the other, east to Culpeper.

³ Mayhurst sits at the southern edge of the town of Orange just off Route 15. Built by John Willis, great-nephew of James Madison, in 1859-60, Mayhurst plantation originally consisted of about 2500 acres. Today the house is an inn.

⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

Here, Bavard's worn and weary Federal cavalry stood, supported from behind by [Nathaniel] Banks, Pope's lieutenant. The battle of Cedar Mountain was on.

"The Yanks, although outnumbered, broke the Rebel left time and again. Jackson indeed fumbled at Cedar Mountain. Finally A.P. Hill arrived and overwhelmed the exhausted Federal troops. The Confederate army took the field for the night and searched for boots, weapons, and food.

"The next day, **August 10th**, Pope had Banks re-enforced. On the **11th** a truce was called for the burial of the dead. Jackson withdrew to Orange Court House and then to Gordonsville, where he met Longstreet. Pope fell back across the Rappahannock. The fateful day of **August 9, 1862** about twenty-four-thousand Confederate troops engaged eight-thousand Yankee infantrymen supported by artillery. At the end of the day 1276 Rebels and 2381 Yanks did not return to their camps....

"The Rappahannock continued to be a campaigning ground until **August 25th**. Pope's Federal forces held the left bank of the river, waiting to be re-enforced by McClellan from Fredericksburg. Robert E. Lee, having joined Jackson and Longstreet, was holding the right bank. The only strategy suitable to Lee's situation was to drive around Pope's right and draw him away from his reinforcements in Fredericksburg. If Pope and McClellan united their forces they could drive Lee clear back to Richmond. On **August 25th** Jackson led his Rebel troops around Pope's right flank clear to Manassas Junction. The rest of the Confederate army under Lee's guidance would occupy the Union forces until Jackson broke the line of communications along the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. Once that was accomplished Lee would cross the Rappahannock and join Jackson. The plan was a success, the two forces met, Pope moved to counter, and the Confederate victory at the second battle of Manassas ensued.

"In early **November, 1862**, many Confederate troops in the Shenandoah Valley were ordered to Fredericksburg. On **November 1st** Kirkpatrick's [General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick] artillery units were ordered from Nineveh Church to Culpeper. On **November 4th** they reached their destination and camped about a mile from town on the Madison Court House Road. Many men were served a delicious home-cooked meal at the home of Colonel Early. On the **19th** Kirkpatrick [Kilpatrick] received orders to march onto Fredericksburg.⁶

"The following day [**20th**] west of the Blue Ridge in Winchester, Stonewall Jackson received similar orders. Jackson marched his men through Fisher's Gap to Madison Court House, from there they marched to Orange Court House and on to Fredericksburg. Many of the Confederate soldiers had no shoes, in the cold November weather their feet often bled. The upshot of these movements was the Battle of Fredericksburg.⁷

"In the **early months of 1863** Stuart [General James Ewell Brown 'Jeb' Stuart] and his Confederate cavalry were south of the Rappahannock in Culpeper protecting Lee's left flank.

⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

Lee was to the west between the Wilderness and Fredericksburg facing General [Joseph] Hooker's Federal troops across the Rappahannock. On **March 17th** Hooker sent General [William] Averell with three-thousand Federal cavalry across Kelly's Ford. Stuart repulsed this attack, but in doing so lost his favorite officer, Major John Pelham.

"The situation remained stable until **April 28th, 1863**. At this time Hooker, hoping to out-flank Lee, sent a strong force from east of Fredericksburg to cross the Rappahannock from Kelly's Ford down to Germanna and Ely's fords. This force was joined by another which crossed the Rappahannock at United States Ford and together they proceeded to Chancellorsville. Lee moved to protect his flank--the battle of Chancellorsville was on. After the smoke cleared, one grave was dug which over-shadowed any thoughts of victory or defeat--Stonewall Jackson was dead.

"In **early May** Stuart returned to Orange County. He set up headquarters at the Court House where he remained until Lee moved up from Chancellorsville on his way to Pennsylvania. Stuart moved to Fleetwood near Brandy Station. Here Stuart held two grand reviews of the Confederate forces. On the **9th of April** an enterprising force of Federal cavalry surprised Stuart at his headquarters. Finally, after hours of fighting, the Yanks retreated back across the Rappahannock. A few days later Lee marched north to Pennsylvania and Gettysburg.

"It was **late July** before Lee and his men returned. Torn, beaten, disheartened, the Confederates had found that they were not as invincible as they had believed. On **July 26th** Kirkpatrick's brigade camped on the high hill west of Culpeper. Kirkpatrick's brigade remained in this area **until October**, moving between Culpeper, Orange, Raccoon's Ford and Gordonsville.

"Early and some other Southern troops camped near Madison Court House in **late June**. They, too, moved around this area for some time.

"On the **13th of September** active operations began again in what is known as the 'Bristoe Campaign'. Urged on by public opinion in the North, an effort was made to improve the victory of Gettysburg by pushing on towards that goal of all their hopes, Richmond, and a series of hot cavalry fights followed...Meade had occupied Culpeper County, but he seemed to be at a loss what to do...

"On **September 22, 1863**, Federal cavalry under Buford and Kilpatrick nearly trapped Stuart and a good portion of his command at Jack's Shop (now called Rochelle). Stuart, whose headquarters had been at the house of Dr. Andrew Grinnan near Orange Court House, moved to Madison on the **7th of October**. He was about to get revenge for his embarrassment at Jack's Shop. From Madison Stuart rode to Warrenton and on to Catlett's Station where he destroyed Union railroads and captured 1370 Federal soldiers while Lee drove the over-cautious Meade back across the Rappahannock.⁸

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

“Pressure from the North for ‘rebel blood’ was great. Meade again crossed the Rappahannock on **November 7th**. Not until nearly three weeks later did he cross the Rapidan moving to face Lee south of the river. Lee placed his men along the west bank of Mine Run and waited. But Meade waited, too. Upon reaching Mine Run the cautious Union general entrenched instead of attacking. Both armies dug formidable entrenchments and continued minor skirmishing. Nothing came of it all and Meade pulled back again, soon to be replaced by U.S. Grant. Lee returned his men to their winter quarters near Orange Court House.⁹

“During the **winter of 1863-1864** Lee’s men remained around Orange Court House, waiting for spring. Many officers, like Stuart and Pelham, visited the daughters who lived in Rebel Hall. General Lee, during this time, often attended services at either St. Thomas’ or the Presbyterian church in Orange Court House. In **February, 1864** Rhodes’ brigade challenged Walker’s brigade to a snowball battle. It was probably the greatest snowball battle ever fought, and showed that ‘men are but children of larger growth’.

“As winter came to a close A.P. Hill decided to christen his daughter Lucy Lee. Richard Davis, rector of St. Thomas’s Parish, christened the child in the home of Colonel John Willis.

“When **spring** came Lee found, from his familiar lookout and signal station on Clarke’s Mountain, that he was facing a large and growing army under the command of U.S. Grant. Grant’s army numbered over one-hundred-thousand men as opposed to Lee’s sixty-four-thousand men. On **May 4th** this blue wave moved across Ely’s and Germanna fords. Grant pushed south through the dense thickets of the Wilderness, through Spotsylvania and on to the final surrender at Appomattox, engaging Lee intermittently all the way.

“This area suffered terribly from the ravages of the Civil War. The best of two generations of men left their homes to fight. Many returned only shades of their former selves—some without limbs, some without hope. Others never returned. As early in the war as the battle of Cedar Mountain those who remained at home also felt the grip of war. After this battle the celebrated John S. Pendleton stated to General Banks that ‘his estate was wasted to the point that he must starve with his family or be permitted to leave the country.’

“The people gave their money, their food, their loved ones, and their lives to the Southern cause and the war consumed them all.”¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Crossing the Rappahannock River



Pontoon across the Rappahannock River, VA, Cavalry column¹¹

¹¹ Brady, Mathew. "The Civil War as Photographed by Mathew Brady", National Archives: *Pontoon across the Rappahannock River, VA, Cavalry column*, Accessed May 7, 2021, Identifier 524925, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/brady-photos>